

## Article

# Franz Kafka, Roberto Bolaño, and the “Artificial Intelligence” of Posthumous Authorship

Ian Ellison

Wadham College, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3PN, UK; ian.ellison@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This article undertakes a comparative reading of the lives and legacies of Franz Kafka and Roberto Bolaño in order to explore the nature of their authorship after their deaths. To this end, this article considers the implications for the construction of posthumous authorship as a category of reception and production if it were viewed metaphorically as a form of artificial intelligence. This article then proceeds to undertake a critical act of fabulation in reading “Josefine die Sängerin; oder das Volk der Mäuse” (“Josefine the Singer; or the Mouse People”) and Bolaño’s short story “Policía de las ratas” (“Police Rat”), a posthumously published sequel-of-sorts to Kafka’s tale, as one combined metatextual and metaphorical commentary on the condition of posthumous authorship and the forms of referentiality that may be discerned between literary works by deceased writers.

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka; Roberto Bolaño; artificial intelligence; posthumous authorship; referentiality

In *Tres*, a collection of poems that was originally published in Spanish in the year 2000 and later in a bilingual edition in September 2011, for which they were translated into English by Laura Healy, the posthumously fêted novelist, short-story writer, poet, and essayist Roberto Bolaño conjures Franz Kafka as the only writer who is miraculously able to survive until the end of days, set apart from the fray, yet proximate to an apocalyptic vision: “Soñé que la Tierra se acababa,” Bolaño writes. “Y que el único ser humano que contemplaba el final era Franz Kafka. En el cielo los Titanes luchaban a muerte. Desde un asiento de hierro forjado del parque de Nueva York Kafka veía arder el mundo” (Bolaño 2013, p. 150).<sup>1</sup> (English translations of all Spanish and German quotations can be found in the endnotes of this article). In numerous interviews given and pieces of writing composed during his lifetime, Bolaño expressed great admiration for Kafka, though his relationship with the Prague author was also a fraught struggle. In an interview published in German as “Unser Teil der Traurigkeit” (“Our share of sadness”) in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 27 April 2002, a year before Bolaño’s death at the age of 50, he discusses his vexed engagements with Kafka’s work. “Mit Kafka, den ich für den grössten Schriftsteller des 20. Jahrhunderts halte, hatte ich einige Probleme”, he admits (Anon 2002, p. 73).<sup>2</sup> “Nicht, dass ich bei Kafka keinen Humor entdeckt hätte; den gibt es, sogar jede Menge. Aber sein Humor war von solcher Hochspannung, dass ich es nicht ertrug” (Anon 2002, p. 73).<sup>3</sup> Drawing on some notable examples from German-language literature, Bolaño subsequently endeavours to set Kafka apart: “Musil, Döblin, Hesse schreiben vom Rand des Abgrunds. Das ist sehr verdienstvoll, denn fast niemand wagt, von dort zu schreiben. Aber Kafka schreibt aus dem Abgrund heraus. Genauer: während er stürzt. Als ich die Herausforderung endlich begriffen hatte, begann ich Kafka aus einer anderen Perspektive zu lesen. Jetzt kann ich ihn mit einer gewissen Gelassenheit wiederlesen und dabei lachen, obgleich niemand mit



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einem Buch von Kafka in der Hand lange gelassen bleiben kann" (Anon 2002, p. 73).<sup>4</sup> Aesthetically, formally, and thematically, Kafka's work is haunted by the machines of bureaucracy whose workings are arbitrary and incomprehensible, whose rules and logic are beyond the prediction or influence of his protagonists.<sup>5</sup> For Bolaño, this alienation reaches a totalizing systemic level, as he strives, perhaps most notably in his seemingly sprawling yet structurally controlled final novel *2666*, to extrapolate connections between literary criticism, the horrors of twentieth-century global conflict, and litanies of carnage and femicide in the urban wastelands of capitalist Latin America. Shot through with violence, his novels are also haunted by the disappearance of so many of his characters during the course of his expansive plots, as they fall through the cracks of their political, social, and cultural milieu, as well as Bolaño's prose. This article seeks to probe further these lines of influence and their implications beyond these two writers' texts and biographies.

Though separated substantially by historical period, as well as by language and to a greater or lesser extent by cultural context, the similarities and points of overlap between the lives and works of Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003), not to mention between their deaths and afterlives, are extensive. To summarise somewhat crudely: both writers died relatively young, relatively unfamous (at least in comparison to the fame they would achieve after their deaths), and both writers left behind a substantial body of partly published and partly unpublished (and unfinished) work. Both Kafka and Bolaño have been posthumously received as prophetic diagnosticians not only of the human condition but also of their contemporary and future societies. Both of them have, at times, been labelled as the world's greatest writer—Kafka, indeed, by Bolaño himself. And, in both cases, the actions of their publishers, editors, translators and other extra-literary actors in curating the two writers' subsequent fame have played a crucial and formative role in determining the nature of their posthumous authorship.<sup>6</sup>

An animating spirit of the present article is Jorge Luis Borges's marvellous, playful essay "Kafka y sus precursors" ("Kafka and his Precursors"), which was first published in the newspaper *La Nación* on 15 August 1951, before reappearing in the essay collection *Otras Inquisiciones* the following year. In it, Borges examines a heterogeneous selection of writers, including the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno, the ninth-century Chinese writer Han Yu, the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, the poet English Victorian poet Robert Browning, the nineteenth-century French novelist Léon Bloy, and the twentieth-century English poet Lord Dunsany. What at first seems to be an account of how these writers may have influenced Kafka becomes instead an act of creative interpretation that allows Borges to yoke together these disparate writers by perceiving various similarities in each of their work with Kafka's own writing. As Borges notes, "Si no me equivoco, las heterogéneas piezas que he enumerado se parecen a Kafka; si no me equivoco, no todas se parecen entre sí. Este último hecho es el más significativo. En cada uno de esos textos está la idiosincrasia de Kafka, en grado mayor o menor, pero si Kafka no hubiera escrito, no la percibiríamos; vale decir, no existiría" (Borges 1974, p. 711).<sup>7</sup> Kafka's work, in other words, is essentially, fundamentally relational. As Rex Butler has pointed out, "Borges's real subject in "Kafka and His Precursors," as in so many of his critical essays, is the question of cultural transmission: what allows a work of art or philosophical doctrine to live on into the future, to cross other cultures and time" (Butler 2010, p. 103). The present article understands Bolaño as consciously extending this tenuous web of influence. He casts Kafka as a precursor to his own writing, providing in the process (however inadvertently) a meta-commentary on how posthumous authorship is seemingly constructed.

Certainly, since at least Roland Barthes wanted to kill off the author and Michel Foucault desired authors to assume the role of a deceased person, questions of authorship and death have been central to literary criticism. Indeed, Walter Benjamin laid the foundations

for these discussions earlier in the twentieth century, expounding in *Der Erzähler*, written between 1936 and 1937, how the experience of death had become increasingly mediated and distanced, further contributing to the decline of storytelling: “[d]er Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen” (Benjamin 1977a, p. 450).<sup>8</sup> Prior to this, Benjamin had also developed a linguistic theory of “living on” or “living forth” (“Fortleben”) through translation and the fame of an original work in his essay on ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ (Benjamin 1972, pp. 9–21).

By bringing works by Kafka and Bolaño into what, to lift from Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, might be called a “constellation of non-simultaneity”,<sup>9</sup> this article posits one potential way to think about how posthumous authorship is constructed. It pursues an approach founded in the idea that literary texts speak into and about a future of which they are necessarily ignorant at the time of their composition. This echoes Benjamin’s notion of an “historical index”, that the past is not left behind as a static object, but extends into the future, rupturing into the present of a later time (Benjamin 1982, p. 577). Considering such a posthumous constellation is at least partly justified by what, in the eyes of both Kafka and Bolaño, constitutes the method of literature itself: that it has some sort of historical consciousness and that it speaks after death (Hoffman 2019). This article also builds on and departs from earlier scholarship in the field of Kafka studies concerning Kafka’s own understanding of mortality by Charles Bernheimer (1987) and Stanley Corngold (1985). More recently, Dominik Zechner has explored how, despite the oft-discussed death-boundness of Franz Kafka’s prose, which characterises his work as a determined by the certainty of ending, “precarious futures” might be discerned by reading Kafka’s prose in terms of survival (Zechner 2017). As Zechner notes, as much as Kafka’s texts revolve around the inescapability, mystery and finitude of existence, their language resists a finite reading—it always requires reading and re-reading, and especially when it should be about death and closure, it constantly opens up new possibilities for interpretation and ways of continuing to speak. Where there is death, in other words, there may be a way out. Yet, as Zechner notes in his 2024 book *Kafka und das Problem der Endlichkeit*, “Kafkas Prosa als von einem iterativen Zauderrhythmus bestimmt zu lesen, der den Tod unaufhörlich verstellt und verzögert, ja seine Möglichkeit prinzipiell bezweifelt, ist keineswegs kanonisch” (Zechner 2024, p. 64).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it holds: linguistically speaking, death in literature is always already a representation of itself, thus it is not death at all, but the survival of its representation, what Zechner calls “das Überleben seiner Darstellung”, and what might also be called, following Benjamin, the “Fortleben seiner Darstellung” (Ellison 2026, forthcoming).

It is no exaggeration to say that Kafka’s and Bolaño’s literary legacies have taken on a life of their own in the decades since their respective untimely deaths. Yet surface comparisons of their biographies beg the question of how such a notion of “a life of their own” might be constructed, at least in the case of these two writers. The present essay seeks to explore in greater comparative depth the many striking resonances between these two literary titans (not so much fighting to the death, here, as mutually reinforcing their literary and cultural acclaim in death) in order to investigate the implications of imagining the creation of posthumous authorship, such as that which emerged in the cases of Kafka and Bolaño, as a form of artificial intelligence. It is worth noting that just because a new form of technological advance has emerged to disrupt teaching and research in academia, it does not necessarily follow that the best thing to do is immediately to integrate it into our teaching and research. Indeed, at the time of writing, it can seem that the best chances of understanding the stakes and potentialities of the apparently fraught relationship between literary study and artificial intelligence might involve taking wild or unexpected imaginative leaps, speculatively entertaining possibly far-fetched intuitions about where ongoing developments may lead. In this spirit, this article undertakes a

critical act of fabulation in order to test the utility for probing deeper into vexed questions of authorial posterity and literary legacy of metaphorically reading the construction of posthumous authorship as a form of artificial intelligence.

The history of artificial intelligence is—it should not be forgotten—intrinsically intertwined with corporate and state power in the modern capitalist world. The data-driven computer systems that constitute artificial intelligence in the present moment are as consequential, as opaque and as unaccountable as the state governments and multinational corporations that circumscribe our waking reality (Runciman 2023). Artificial intelligence, such as we have begun to understand it in the early to mid-2020s, is something which exists, (if exist is even the appropriate verb), beyond the control of any one human being's agency and individuality. Apocalyptic visions (not unlike like Bolaño's of Kafka) emerge frequently in discussions of artificial intelligence in the present day out of genuine fears, a widespread dread of imminent extinction through the machinations of an entity with greater power than that of any single individuals, although as Shannon Vallor has noted, "[t]here is no scientific ground for this fear" (Vallor 2024, p. 7). The irony that current leaders of multinational corporations who repeatedly galvanise the development of artificial intelligence technologies more often than not occupy a similarly despotic position in—or, perhaps better, outside of—society frequently goes unacknowledged.

Artificial intelligence may be immortal, and it may potentially have the power to replace humanity entirely: as the digital threatens to overtake the biological, so in literary reception, this article ventures to suggest, posthumous authorship overtakes living authorship. Despite individual human components existing within states and corporations, as well as within the curation of authors' posthumous reputations and legacies, their larger overarching structures and interconnected networks of numerous extra-literary actors and institutions (editors, translators, publishing houses, critics, and so on) bear a trace element of the machine that acts and potentially thinks—or, at least, seems to think—for itself. If, as David Runciman has noted, "[s]tarting in the seventeenth century, modern states and corporations have gradually, and then much more rapidly, taken over the planet. They have extraordinary, superhuman powers, and they have used those powers to transform the human condition" (Runciman 2023, p. 4), then similarly, this article imagines networks comprising numerous actors as constituting a kind of artificial intelligence—a mechanism that takes the place of individual human actors—which is able to take over and run the operations of posthumous authorship. After all, it falls to heirs and other copyright holders to interpret writers' last wills and testaments, and in doing so they may go beyond what was explicitly expressed by the author, or seek to deviate or even defy these wishes, in order to render (often unfinished) manuscripts into books that can be read and translated. Though composed of human beings—including, for instance, administrators, editors, publishers, scholars, and intellectuals, as well as other writers or individuals who may claim such authority over deceased authors' material and literary legacy with varying degrees of legitimacy and success—and constructed as if to behave in human fashion, the diffuse network that creates and curates the conditions of posthumous authorship is not itself human. These ideas certainly echo Bruno Latour's "Actor-Network-Theory", which elaborates how social phenomena emerge from dynamic interactions between human and non-human "actors" existing in networked relation to each other, and how these relationships constantly shift and are negotiated, such that all actors, including objects and ideas, have agency and contribute to shaping social reality (Latour 2005). Building on this, what follows is an attempt to ground these abstractions in the concrete reality of literary texts by the authors whose posthumous authorship it examines.

Franz Kafka and Roberto Bolaño have, by now, become classic writers of the modern and contemporary eras under the conditions of their posthumous authorship. Indeed,

in both Kafka's and Bolaño's case, their death is the necessary condition or catalyst of their contemporary fame and reception. Without doubt, however, cases of posthumous authorship result in an increased emphasis on questions of legacy and reception of an author's work. Often authors go to great lengths to control who might have access to their unpublished materials after their deaths, attempting to curate (as in the case of W. G. Sebald, for example) their post-mortem reception, or even attempting to destroy the possibility of their works' ever being received. Kafka is surely the *ne plus ultra* in world literature, in this regard, both in terms of the scale of the attempt and the magnitude of its failure. Disputes often arise among an author's heirs, the appointed executors of their estate, editors, and their publishers, not to mention other writers as well as academic researchers, all of whom might exert to a greater or lesser degree different claims on an author's legacy with varying levels of legitimacy. This will frequently lead to numerous editions of works, plus their proliferating translations into other languages, as well as a desire on the part of many actors to publish and republish every last fragment of writing left by a deceased writer in various forms. Max Brod's redacted editions of Kafka's diaries, to later more comprehensive edited editions and even facsimile versions of his manuscripts, as well as incomplete drafts of stories by both Kafka and Bolaño are examples of this practice. There emerges, in short, a veritable posthumous literary industry. Crucially, however, dead authors are unable to offer further comment on their life and work: no author would be able to anticipate all future eventualities that may arise after their death, and this is perhaps especially true in the cases of writers including Kafka and Bolaño, neither of whom held much store by consistency or constancy.

Clear affinities exist between these two writers, not least because they both persevered with their writing despite the illnesses that affected their quality of life in their last years. Suffering from tuberculosis, Kafka died in relative obscurity in early June 1924 at a sanatorium in the commune of Kierling in Klosterneuburg on the outskirts Vienna, having just corrected the proofs of a volume of short stories entitled *Ein Hungerkünstler* ("A Hunger Artist") the publication of which he did not live to see. Bolaño died in 2003 after a long period of declining health due to liver failure and was third on the list for a liver transplant while he continued work on his final amendments to the posthumously published *2666*. Indeed, Bolaño seems to extract a lesson from Kafka when it comes to understanding what is truly important for writing, particularly when faced with one's own immortality.<sup>11</sup> The facts of these two authors' biographies are scarcely new discoveries, yet they bear rehearsing for the many resonances and occasional dissonances between them. Kafka was a Czech writer, of Jewish origin, who wrote in German. Born in Prague into a family of Ashkenazi Jews, he assimilated the Czech linguistic heritage on his father's side and the German one on his mother's side. However, it is clear that, in literary terms, the German heritage weighs more heavily on Kafka, who ended up writing the vast majority of his literary production in German, except for some letters written in Czech and some notebooks in Hebrew (Northey 2018; Nekula 2018; Zusi 2018). One aspect of Bolaño's emergence onto the literary scene that immediately attracted attention in Latin America was his condition as a nomadic and somewhat de-territorialised writer. Bolaño is not easily placed within Chilean, Mexican or Spanish literature. He became almost a kind of pariah, as he himself recognised, remarking in an address he once made in Caracas, "pues a mí lo mismo me da que digan que soy chileno, aunque algunos colegas chilenos prefieran verme como mexicano, o que digan que soy mexicano, aunque algunos colegas mexicanos prefieren considerarme español, o, ya de plano, desaparecido en combate, e incluso lo mismo me da que me consideren español, aunque algunos colegas españoles pongan el grito en el cielo y a partir de ahora digan que soy venezolano, nacido en Caracas o Bogotá, cosa que tampoco me disgusta, más bien todo lo contrario. Lo cierto es que soy chileno y

también soy muchas otras cosas” (Bolaño 2004c, p. 36).<sup>12</sup> Bolaño certainly had a nomadic literary apprenticeship: born in Chile, he moved to Mexico with his family as an adolescent, and went on to lead a peripatetic life, at the end of which he had made his home in Spain, first on the Costa Brava, then later in the Catalan beach town of Blanes in the Girona province. All three nations exerted decisive pressure on his formation as a writer: if Chile constituted his childhood and Mexico his adolescence, then Spain was Bolaño’s adulthood, his maturity, his too-soon-over later years. In the case of both Bolaño and Kafka, however, their literary afterlives would eventually expand to encompass the entire globe; the fact that both of them are reported to have remained at work on their final pieces of writing on their deathbeds only serves to burnish their posthumous reputation as dedicated literary artists. Yet, of course, this fact had to be witnessed, recorded, communicated by other agents beyond the deceased authors themselves.

Certainly, Bolaño praised Kafka comprehensively at any opportunity, announcing, for instance, ‘la literature de Kafka’ as ‘la más esclarecedora y terrible (y también la más humilde) del siglo XX (Bolaño 2004c, p. 43).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, both Kafka and Bolaño himself can be said to have produced literary œuvres that were enlightening and startling in equal measure, opening up and deepening literary modes of representation and figuration, while both evincing a predilection for fragmentary and unfinished aesthetics. There is, moreover, seemingly an affinity in the illogical movement of their characters’ actions and the will and the chance condition that determined the publication of their unfinished pieces. Notoriously, it was Kafka’s last wish that his unpublished writings be destroyed “ausnahmslos am liebsten ungelesen” (“without exception and preferably unread”). Although, as Carolin Duttlinger has argued, the two notes he left to Max Brod “betray a deep ambiguity, indeed a palpable sense of melancholy [. . .], and oscillate between the impulses of destruction and preservation” (Duttlinger 2021, p. 418). Had Max Brod, Kafka’s friend and literary executor, carried out Kafka’s wishes, however, we would today have none of his three novels or his diaries, only the story collections *Betrachtung* (“Contemplation”) and *Ein Landarzt* (“A Country Doctor”), as well as individual stories like “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”) and “Die Verwandlung” (“The Metamorphosis”) that had appeared in literary magazines.

Bolaño, for his part, left no orders to destroy his work, although his final wishes for how his writings should be handled were also disobeyed. During the five years that Bolaño penned 2666, he also battled illness while awaiting his liver transplant. Though unfamiliar with Ciudad Juárez, he relied on insights from acquaintances such as journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, author of works like *Huesos en el desierto* (“Bones in the Desert”), which had explored the city’s femicides. Before his passing, Bolaño discussed the composition and structure of 2666 with his friend Jorge Herralde, the director of the Anagrama publishing house. In his afterword to the novel the literary critic Ignacio Echevarría explains how “A la muerte de Roberto Bolaño se dijo que el magno proyecto de 2666 había sido transformado en una serie de cinco novelas, que se corresponderían con las cinco partes en que la obra está dividida. Lo cierto es que los últimos meses de su vida Bolaño insistió en esta idea, cada vez menos confiado como estaba en poder culminar su proyecto inicial. Conviene advertir, sin embargo, que en esta intención se interpusieron consideraciones de orden práctico (en las que, dicho sea de paso, Bolaño no era muy ducho): ante la cada vez más probable eventualidad de una muerte inminente, a Bolaño le parecía más llevadero y más rentable, para sus editores tanto como para sus herederos, habérselas con cinco novelas independientes, de corta o mediana extensión, antes que con una sola descomunal, vastísima, y para colmo no completamente concluida” (Bolaño 2004a, p. 1121)<sup>14</sup> As the prefatory note from the Bolaño heirs makes clear, however, “Después de su muerte y tras la lectura y estudio de la obra y del material de trabajo dejado por Roberto que lleva a cabo Ignacio Echevarría (amigo al que designó como persona referente para solicitar consejo

sobre sus asuntos literarios), surge otra consideración de orden menos práctico: el respeto al valor literario de la obra, que hace que de forma conjunta con Jorge Herralde cambiemos la decisión de Roberto y que 2666 se publique primero en toda su extensión en un solo volumen, tal como él habría hecho de no haberse cumplido la peor de las posibilidades que el proceso de su enfermedad ofrecía” (Bolaño 2004a, p. 11).<sup>15</sup>

Just as Max Brod and others curated the release of numerous editions of Kafka’s work over the decades after his death, so too have Bolaño’s publishers have attempted to publish every scrap of material he produced during his lifetime, the majority of which is maintained by as part of the Bolaño Archive, held in the author’s former home. However incomplete or insignificant, early draft versions of several already published texts have been released in Spanish and in translation, alongside entirely unpublished fragments. The posthumous publication of additional works by Bolaño has thus far included the novels *El Tercer Reich* (“The Third Reich”) and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (“Woes of the True Policeman”), as well as *El Secreto del Mal* (“The Secret of Evil”), a collection of short stories. Most recently, the collection of incomplete novellas entitled *Sepulcros de vaqueros* (“Cowboy Graves”) was published (Bolaño 2021), which is accompanied by an afterword by the literary critic Juan Antonio Masoliver Ródenas and a note on the text by Bolaño’s widow, Carolina López Hernández, who outlines how, in the archive, the first two works exist in print and electronic form, while the third exist in print form only.

Bolaño himself demonstrated a profound and abiding interest in writers who chose not to publish, or even to write, as well as writers who were prematurely silenced. In an interview with Bolaño by Eliseo Álvarez Turiam, published posthumously in June 2005 in the Barcelona periodical *Turia*, Bolaño declares that “hay silencios literarios”, and went on to connect several of his key literary influences on this idea: “El silencio de Kafka, por ejemplo, ese silencio que no pudo ser. Cuando pide que quemen sus papeles, Kafka está optando por el silencio, opta por un silencio literario, todo en él era literario. Es decir que era absolutamente moral. La literatura de Kafka, aparte de ser la mejor obra, la más alta obra literaria del siglo XX, es de una moralidad extrema, de una delicadez y de una moralidad extrema, cosas que no suelen ir juntas tampoco” (Bolaño 2006, p. 44).<sup>16</sup> Kafka and Bolaño assume across their works the emergence of evil and the strange as hegemonic themes in their narratives, and the critical reception of both writers substantially improved once they were no longer alive. Nevertheless, there are also important distinctions to be made between the cases of Kafka and Bolaño: their treatment and scope of power, the auto-biographical component to their writing, and the overwhelmingly greater presence of supernatural or magical elements in Bolaño’s texts, among others. The literary dialogue that emerges between Kafka’s and Bolaño’s respective *œuvres* is marked, therefore, largely by affinity and occasionally by disjuncture. The two writers develop expansive literatures to explore the anomalies of various communities and the challenges that subjects impose on them and vice versa, with several key texts by Kafka and Bolaño addressing the dominance and coercion that power exerts on the individual.

Kafka’s unfinished novel *Der Process* (“The Trial”), for instance, recounts the strange judicial case of Josef K. who, like the reader, remains ignorant of the crime of which he has been accused, such that any innocence or guilt remains necessarily indeterminate. The novel allows only brief glimpses of the mechanisms of the court itself, such as the role played by the guardians or the lawyers. Ultimately, they are incapable of explaining its internal dynamics. Yet it remains a court that operates on the rule of law. Famously, too, there is no possibility of achieving innocence, only an apparent acquittal and adjournment. In the eyes of Kafka’s court, we are all guilty of something. *Das Schloss* (“The Castle”) tells of the journey of K., a land surveyor. He is called to work for the Castle, but a series of bureaucratic obstacles ensure he ends up undertaking further unnecessary work. K. begins

a series of negotiations with the aim of achieving recognition of his situation. Although the novel was not finished by Kafka, Brod's epilogue tells how K. does not achieve his goal, only achieving the right to live and work within the country's borders after his death from starvation. In his short novel *Amuleto* ("Amulet"), meanwhile, Bolaño expands the examination of power's coercive domination from an individual's situation to the plight of a generation by choosing to narrate the atrocious crimes experienced by a generation of young Latin Americans during the Mexican 1968 movement, including the army's invasion of the university and the subsequent military massacre of students, from the perspective of a female Uruguayan exile who has lived illegally in Mexico City since the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

The closest affinity between two texts by the two authors examined in this article concerns, appropriately enough, the very last short story Kafka ever penned, which would appear in the aforementioned posthumously published *Ein Hungerkünstler* collection that he had edited on his deathbed in 1924, and a story by Bolaño entitled "Policía de las ratas" ("Police Rat") that appeared in a posthumously published short story collection. Indeed, as Thomas Beebee has observed, Kafka "figures prominently in the posthumous collection of Bolaño writings, *El gaucho insufrible* (The Insufferable Gaucho)" (Beebee 2022, pp. 158–68). The epigraph to *El gaucho insufrible*, which reads, "Quizá nosotros no perdamos demasiado, después de todo" ("So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all"), signals this relationship at the outset: though the work itself is not cited, this is the first line of the final paragraph of the last short story that Kafka wrote, "Josefine die Sängerin; oder das Volk der Mäuse" ("Josefine the Singer; or the Mouse People"), where Kafka writes, "[v]ielleicht werden wir also gar nicht sehr viel entbehren" (Kafka 1996, p. 377). The "Josefine" story is co-opted, in a Borgesian manner, as a prequel for "Policía de las ratas", one of the collection's longer stories, posthumously amplifying a portion of Kafka's work that is itself deeply concerned with the posthumous reputation of the figure of the artist. The duality of the title of Kafka's original implies equal weighting of significance, between the singer Josefine, who is largely absent from the narrative, in fact, and her public audience. It is this fact in particular that the present article wishes to highlight, instrumentalizing Kafka's and Bolaño's stories, as well as the relationship between them, to highlight and interrogate the role of collectives of others (be it, *mutatis mutandis*, an audience or a readership) in structuring the posthumous figure of the artist. More than seeing Bolaño's story as merely a sequel to Kafka's, or Kafka's story as merely a precursor to Bolaño's, this article undertakes a thought experiment of seeing the two stories as one textual continuity which, moreover, might be read metaphorically—speculatively—as establishing key aspects of conceiving of posthumous authorship as artificial intelligence.

In both Kafka's and Bolaño's stories, Josefine is not so much a protagonist as an absent figure, who is invoked time and again by either the narrator or in the dialogue between other characters who might have known her. In Kafka's original story, which echoes Kafka's own vacillating scepticism regarding his literary output, she is an artist—a singer—about whom the narrator and the other mice cannot agree: is her art really art? It remains indeterminate whether the noises she makes constitute a form of singing or whether it is simply a piping noise that all mice can make, while Josefine has turned it into an artistic practice: "Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang? Ist es nicht vielleicht doch nur ein Pfeifen? Und Pfeifen allerdings kennen wir alle, es ist die eigentliche Kunstfertigkeit unseres Volkes, oder vielmehr gar keine Fertigkeit, sondern eine charakteristische Lebensäußerung. Alle pfeifen wir, aber freilich denkt niemand daran, das als Kunst auszugeben, wir pfeifen, ohne darauf zu achten, ja, ohne es zu merken und es gibt sogar viele unter uns, die gar nicht wissen, daß das Pfeifen zu unsern Eigentümlichkeiten gehört" (Kafka 1996, pp. 351–52).<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the mouse people are united in a common cause of appreciation of Josefine's artistry: "Schon tauchen auch wir in das Gefühl der Menge, die warm, Leib an Leib, scheu

atmend horcht" (Kafka 1996, p. 356).<sup>19</sup> Whatever the nature of the noises produced by Josefine, individual listeners seem to forget themselves, thereby establishing a broader collective mass, or collective cultural memory, despite the narrator's consistent lack of certainty throughout the story. Wrested free from any scholarly schemata, her reception relies instead on the consensus of a community. Indeed, Josefine's performance ushers in much in the way of collective effects, conjuring a kind of illusory field of reception among her people, from whom she holds herself apart. Insisting on her uniqueness and her isolation, Josefine exempts herself from the communal duties of the mouse people, thus cutting herself off from the masses, desiring to be separate yet defining herself in relation to them.

Crucially, the reader perceives Josefine as she herself is perceived in the story by another: the entire situation is mediated, second-hand, passed on. Ultimately, however, this is a story about the stakes of creating art. Josefine embodies the mouse people's apparent need to ascribe collective meaning. Despite its questioning the very nature of the art to which it testifies, Kafka's final story enacts how art is fundamentally defined through constructed forms of collective cultural memory or forgetting, the mouse people and the story's narrator functioning as an archive or repository. At the story's conclusion, Josefine does not ultimately perish, yet Kafka leaves the question of her posthumous legacy undetermined: "Vielleicht werden wir also gar nicht sehr viel entbehren, Josefine aber, erlöst von der irdischen Plage, die aber ihrer Meinung nach Auserwählten bereitet ist, wird fröhlich sich verlieren in der zahllosen Menge der Helden unseres Volkes, und bald, da wir keine Geschichte treiben, in gesteigerter Erlösung vergessen sein wie alle ihre Brüder" (Kafka 1996, p. 377).<sup>20</sup> Despite the account the narrator has left his readers, Josefine will seemingly be posthumously redeemed yet forgotten. For Kafka's own reception, it is the final caesura of death that proves to be the catalyst of his subsequent status as a world-literary author.

In Bolaño's sequel or response to Kafka's story, the reader may assume that Josefine has unequivocally died. In any case, once again, she barely features in the story that principally concerns a rat who happens to be her nephew (the mouse people having interbred with rats in order to become a stronger species more susceptible to survival), though her memory still looms large: "De todos los artistas que hemos tenido o al menos de aquellos que aún permanecen como esqueléticos signos de interrogación en nuestra memoria, la más grande, sin duda fue mi tía Josefina" (Bolaño 2003, pp. 57–58).<sup>21</sup> During the course of the tale, he investigates crimes that take place in the dank subterranean rat world down in the sewers. A killer is on the loose and the police rat, whose name not coincidentally is José, though in the story he is usually known as "Pepe el Tira" ("Pepe the cop"), begins to suspect that the killer of the numerous dead rats is also a rat. His superiors, however, refuse to believe this, since rats do not kill rats. Yet the dead rats in question have been killed for pleasure or sport, not by the hungry predators who stalk the sewer tunnels killing for food. The narrator, Pepe the cop, outlines the collective agency of the rat and mouse society of which he is a part: "Vivimos en colectividad y la colectividad sólo necesita el trabajo diario la ocupación constante de cada uno de sus miembros en un fin que escapa a los afanes individuales y que, sin embargo, es lo único que garantiza nuestro existir en tanto que individuos" (Bolaño 2003, p. 57).<sup>22</sup> In Bolaño's story, Josefine has decidedly not been forgotten, since several characters including the narrator remember her in somewhat ambivalent terms. Pepe tells how, "Conocí a uno, muy viejo y enflaquecido por la edad y por el trabajo, que a su vez había conocido a mi tía y que le gustaba hablar de ella. Nadie entendía a Josefina, decía, pero todos la querían o fingían quererla y ella era Feliz así o fingía serlo" (Bolaño 2003, p. 56).<sup>23</sup> He also recounts another character who likewise offers varying impressions of Josefine: "A veces decía que Josefina era gorda y tiránica [...]. Otras veces, en cambio,

decía que Josefina era una sombra a la que él [...] había visto fugazmente. Una sombra temblorosa, seguida de unos chillidos extraños” (Bolaño 2003, p. 58).<sup>24</sup> Josefina the singer seems just as mutable and unclassifiable as ever, yet this tremulous shadow, trailing a range of odd squeaking noises, will return at the close of Bolaño’s tale.

In one of the only analyses of the resonances between Kafka’s and Bolaño’s stories to date, Brett Levinson has noted how “Bolaño strives to expand upon the fundamental question raised by the Kafka parable: ‘How and why (rather than what) is literature?’ Bolaño, for his part, asks: ‘How and why is literature within the social and political setting of neoliberalism?’” (Levinson 2014, p. 93). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the artificial intelligence of the collective that constructs the category of posthumous authorship is a part of this setting; it is crucial, in other words, to the how and why of literature. The so-called afterlife of a literary character from one story that is resurrected in another later story, where both texts in question grapple with narrative and thematic variations on the relationship of the artist or the writer, to their audience and readership, invites the suggestive reading of these posthumously published stories as emblematic of their creators’ posthumous authorship that is stage-managed by a collective of actors operating beyond their own individual capacities. Indeed, the very fact that Bolaño rescues Josefina from oblivion, reviving her in his text, stages a rejection of oblivion at the level of literary tradition, albeit under the aspect of the posthumous. As Pepe remarks, when steeling himself to enter the darkness of the sewer tunnels in the story’s penultimate paragraph in order to attempt to stop another violent crime from taking place, “[y]a es demasiado tarde para todo, pensé. Y también pensé: ¿En qué momento se hizo demasiado tarde? ¿En la época de mi tía Josefina? ¿Cien años antes? ¿Mil años antes? ¿Tres mil años antes? ¿No estábamos, acaso, condenados desde el principio de nuestra especie?” (Bolaño 2003, p. 86).<sup>25</sup> Both Kafka and Bolaño pursue an unorthodox ascribing of biological fate to their stories, which subsequently reflects back onto the authors themselves, particularly in light of these works’ posthumous publication.

In “Policía de las ratas”, Josefina is sublimated into posterity. Yet Bolaño’s story intriguingly offers a further potential model for what the construction of posthumous authorship might look like in Josefina’s case. Resurrecting the tremulous shadow of Josefina, trailing a range of odd squeaking noises, in all its polyphony and distortion, a multifaceted yet degenerate cultural memory emerges in the form of a queen rat that Pepe encounters on the fringes of society near the tale’s end: “Cuéntame la historia, dijo una voz que era muchas voces y que provenía de la oscuridad. Al principio sentí pavor y retrocedí, pero no tardé en comprender que se trataba de una rata reina muy vieja, es decir varias ratas cuyas colas se audaron en la primera infancia [...].” (Bolaño 2003, p. 83).<sup>26</sup> This queen rat seems to recognise Pepe, drawing lines of connection between Josefina’s time and the story’s present: “la voz que era muchas voces y que salía de la oscuridad me preguntó si yo era el sobrino de Josefina la Cantora. Así es, dije. Nosotros nacimos cuando Josefina aún estaba viva, dijo la rata reina, y se movió con gran esfuerzo. Distinguí una enorme bola oscura llena de ojillos velados por los años. Supuse que la rata reina era gorda y que la suciedad había terminado por solidificar sus patas traseras” (Bolaño 2003, p. 83).<sup>27</sup> This ghastly, half-perceived, composite creature suggests itself as the remnants of Josefina. In her heyday, Josefina was the singular artistic figure onto whom the mouse people projected their unified cultural memory and their understanding of—or belief in—the nature of art. Now, the people speak ambivalently of Josefina, and in the shifting darkness there lurks a composite figure, speaking in many voices, seemingly the left-over, the knotted together tail-end of what might once have been a more uniform artistic icon: “Durante unos segundos sólo oí suspirar a la sombra que hervía” (Bolaño 2003, p. 83).<sup>28</sup> This, one might imagine, is a warning against the vicissitudes of the posthumous. For Bolaño, Josefina

does not and could not disappear, as long as cultural memory—and across his and Kafka’s posthumous writing—a kind of referentiality obtain.

In Bolaño’s later response to Kafka’s story, the mouse people have changed, relocating and mixing with others; memories of Josefine are equivocal, uncertain; and the posthumous nature of her artistry—or authorship—is partly obscured, multivocal, and exhausted. Pepe and the reader are confronted with an embodiment of this in the queen rat: an entity that appears to be one intelligence yet writhes and pulls in all directions; something that might be construed as an artificial intelligence. The queen rat’s fading eyesight and years’ worth of immobilising encrustations are a corporeal warning, perhaps, against the dangers of attempting posthumously to render memory of an artist as static and fixed. And in the movement from Kafka’s story to Bolaño’s, in insisting on the continuity between the two, this essay ascribes its own form of artificial intelligence to this process of literary legacy, reading both stories as one combined metatextual and metaphorical commentary on the condition of posthumous authorship and the forms of referentiality between literary works by deceased writers. If there seems to be any “artificial intelligence” preserving and curating certain writers’ posthumous authorship, then it is one of many voices that over time emerges from the gloom.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Translation: “I dreamt that Earth was finished. And the only human being to contemplate the end was Franz Kafka. In heaven, the Titans were fighting to the death. From a wrought-iron seat in Central Park, Kafka was watching the world burn.” (Bolaño 2013, p. 151). This passage is the thirty-first of fifty-seven such aphoristic pronouncements which together comprise Bolaño’s “Un paseo por la literatura” (“A Stroll through Literature”), a “series of short poems” that were composed in the small Catalan beach town of Blanes in 1994 and dedicated to the writers Rodrigo Pinto and Andrés Neuman.
- <sup>2</sup> Translation: “I had some problems with Kafka, whom I consider the greatest writer of the twentieth century”.
- <sup>3</sup> Translation: “It wasn’t that I hadn’t discovered his humour; there’s plenty of that in his books. Heaps. But his humour was so highly taut that I couldn’t bear it”.
- <sup>4</sup> Translation: “Musil, Döblin, Hesse wrote from the rim of the abyss. And that is commendable, since almost nobody wagers to write from there. But Kafka writes from out of the abyss itself. To be more precise: as he’s falling. When I finally understood that those had been the stakes, I began to read Kafka from a different perspective. Now I can read him with a certain composure and even laugh while reading. Though no one with a book by Kafka in his hands can remain composed for very long”.
- <sup>5</sup> A notable exception is another example of posthumous authorship presented within Kafka’s own writings, namely the torturous writing device in his story *In der Strafkolonie* (*In the Penal Colony*), first written in 1914 and later published as a standalone text in 1919. For the most part, this machine behaves in a predictable manner, meticulously carving the incontestable sentence of each defendant into their body for hours before they perish. Until, that is, its silent yet devastatingly violent collapse does away with expectations based on prior patterns in a macabre spectacle of self-destruction of both machine and man. Administrative

mechanisms in Kafka, then, are not always totally uncontrollable; instead, they are often positioned right at the margin of intelligible predictability—not unlike contemporary systems of artificial intelligence.

6 This is a critical concept that has so far only been loosely defined in literary scholarship. See, for instance, Gallop (2011), Sina and Spoerhase (2017), and Hoffman (2019). The author of the present article is greatly indebted to Urs Büttner for many enriching conversations about posthumous authorship and literary afterlife during our shared time in Oxford, though no doubt he will not agree with every argument or inference made in the present article.

7 Translation: “If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is what is most significant. Kafka’s idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist” (Borges 1999, p. 365).

8 Translation: “Death is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (Benjamin 2002, p. 151).

9 “Die Ideen verhalten sich zu den Dingen wie die Sternbilder zu den Sternen” (Benjamin 1980, p. 214). Translation: “Ideas are to objects what constellations are to the stars” (Benjamin 1977b, p. 34). See also Bloch (1978).

10 Translation: “Reading Kafka’s prose as determined by an iterative rhythm of hesitation that continually dissimulates and delays death, and even fundamentally doubts its possibility, is by no means canonical”.

11 As Bolaño wrote in the final section (subtitled “Enfermedad y Kafka”, or “Illness and Kafka”) of a piece that also appeared in the posthumous collection *El Gaucho Insufrible*, “Cuenta Cannetti en su libro sobre Kafka que el más grande escritor del siglo XX comprendió que los dados estaban tirados y que ya nada le separaba de la escritura el día que por primera vez escupió sangre. ¿Qué quiero decir cuando digo que ya nada le separaba de su escritura? Sinceramente, no lo sé muy bien. Supongo que quiero decir que Kafka comprendía que los viajes, el sexo y los libros son caminos que no llevan a ninguna parte, y que sin embargo son caminos por los que hay que internarse y perderse para volverse a encontrar o para encontrar algo, lo que sea, un libro, un gesto, un objeto perdido, para encontrar cualquier cosa, tal vez un método, con suerte: lo nuevo, lo que siempre ha estado allí” (Bolaño 2003, p. 158). Translation: “Elias Canetti, in his book on the twentieth century’s greatest writer, says that Kafka understood that the dice had been rolled, and that nothing could come between him and his writing, the day he spat blood for the first time. What do I mean when I say that nothing could come between him and his writing? To be honest, I don’t really know. I guess I mean that Kafka understood that travel, sex, and books are paths that lead nowhere except to the loss of the self, and yet they must be followed and the self must be lost, in order to find it again, or to find something, whatever it may be—a book, and expression, a misplaced object—in order to find anything at all, a method, perhaps, and, with a bit of luck, the new, which has been there all along.” (Bolaño 2010, p. 144).

12 Translation: “It doesn’t matter to me whether people say I’m Chilean, although some of my Chilean fellow writers would rather see me as Mexican, or whether they say I’m Mexican, although some of my Mexican fellow writers would rather see me as Spanish, or simply as lost in combat, and I don’t even care whether people think of me as Spanish, although some of my Spanish fellow writers might protest and decide from now on to call me Venezuelan, born in Caracas or Bogotá, which wouldn’t bother me either, in fact on the contrary. The truth is that I’m Chilean and I’m also many other things” (Bolaño 2004b, p. 33).

13 Translation: “Kafka’s *œuvre* as ‘the most illuminating and terrible (and also the humblest) of the twentieth century’” (Bolaño 2004b, p. 41).

14 Translation: “Upon Bolaño’s death it was said that the grand project of 2666 had been transformed into a series of five novels corresponding to the five parts into which the work was divided. In fact, in the last months of his life Bolaño insisted on this idea, as he grew less and less certain that he would be able to complete his initial project. It must be said, however, that practical considerations (never Bolaño’s strong point, incidentally) figured into this plan: faced with the increasing likelihood of his imminent death, Bolaño thought it would be less of a burden and more profitable, both for his publisher and for his heirs, to deal with five separate novels, short or medium-length, than with a single massive, sprawling work, one not even entirely finished” (Bolaño 2008, p. 895).

15 Translation: “After his death, and following the reading and study of his work and notes by Ignacio Echevarria (a friend Roberto designated as his literary executor), another consideration of a less practical nature arose: respect for the literary value of the work, which caused us, together with Jorge Herralde, to reverse Roberto’s decision and publish 2666 first in full, in a single volume, as he would have done had his illness not taken the gravest course” (Bolaño 2008, p. xvii).

16 Translation: “There are literary silences. Kafka’s, for example, which is a silence that cannot be. When he asks that his papers be burned, Kafka is opting for silence, opting for a literary silence, all in a literary era. That is to say, he was completely moral. Kafka’s literature, aside from being the best work, the highest literary work of the twentieth century, is of an extreme morality and of an extreme gentility, things that usually do not go together either” (Maristain and Bolaño 2009, pp. 93–123).

17 Names matter, too. Both writers have used the initials “K.” and “B.” respectively as shorthand codes for their protagonists that simultaneously encourage readers to associate the fiction with the author and evoke distance or estrangement through anonymity. The unusual surname of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung”, also shares orthographic similarities with

its author's own, with its five letters and identically placed vowels. Again, Bolaño echoes this with an alter ego who appears across several of his works, the diacritic-less Arturo Belano.

- 18 Translation: "Is it in fact song at all? Is it perhaps only piping? And of course we are all familiar with piping; it is our people's one real skill, or rather, it is not a skill at all, but a characteristic expression of our life. We all of us pipe, but truly, nobody thinks of claiming it as an art, we pipe without paying any attention to it, indeed, without noticing, and there are even many among us who have no idea at all that piping is among our distinctive characteristics" (Kafka 2012, p. 66).
- 19 Translation: "We too immerse ourselves in the feelings of the crowd, fervently listening, bodies packed close, hardly daring to breathe" (Kafka 2012, p. 69).
- 20 Translation: "So perhaps we won't be missing all that much. Josefine, on the other hand, delivered from the earthly torment which in her opinion is the lot of the elect, will lose herself happily in the numberless host of our people's heroes, and, since we don't go in for history, she will soon, redeemed and transfigured, be forgotten, like all her brethren" (Kafka 2012, p. 80).
- 21 Translation: "Of all the artists, or at least of those who remain in our memories like skeletal question marks, the greatest was, without a doubt, my aunt Josephine" (Bolaño 2010, p. 49).
- 22 Translation: "We live in a collective, and what the collective depends on is, above all, the daily labor, the ceaseless activity of each of its members, working toward a goal that transcends our individual aspirations but is nevertheless the only guarantee of our existence as individuals." (Bolaño 2010, p. 49).
- 23 Translation: "I met one who was very old and withered by age and work: he had known my aunt and liked to talk about her. Nobody understood Josephine, he said, but everyone loved her or pretended to, and she was happy—or pretended to be" (Bolaño 2010, p. 48).
- 24 Translation: "Sometimes he said Josephine was fat and tyrannical [. . .]. Sometimes, however, by contrast, he said that all he had glimpsed of Josephine [. . .] was a shadow, a tremulous shadow, trailing a range of odd squeaking noises" (Bolaño 2010, p. 49).
- 25 Translation: "[i]t's already too late, I thought, for everything. I also thought: When did it become too late? Was it in the time of my aunt Josephine? Or a hundred years before that? Or a thousand, three thousand years before? Weren't we damned right from the origin of our species?" (Bolaño 2010, p. 72).
- 26 Translation: "Tell me a story, said a voice from what was many voices, emerging from the darkness. At first I was terrified and shrank away, but then I realized that it was a very old queen rat—several rats, that is, whose tails had become knotted in early childhood [. . .]." (Bolaño 2010, p. 70).
- 27 Translation: "[t]he voice that was many voices emerging from the darkness asked me if I was the nephew of Josefine the Singer. That's correct, I said. We were born when Josefine was still alive, said the queen rat, shifting herself laboriously. I could just make out a huge dark ball dotted with little eyes dimmed by age. The queen rat, I conjectured, was fat, and a build-up of filth had immobilized her" (Bolaño 2010, p. 70). Specifically, in the original Spanish text, it is the queen rat's hind paws that are immobilized.
- 28 Translation: "For a few seconds all I could hear from the seething shadows was a sound of sighing" (Bolaño 2010, p. 70).

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